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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CHIANG MAI 000110

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 7/17/2018  
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [BM](#) [TH](#)  
SUBJECT: BURMESE ASYLUM SEEKERS FORCIBLY RETURNED; NOT HANDED OVER TO  
BURMESE AUTHORITIES

REF: A. CHIANG MAI 69 (MILITARY DETENTION OF AMCIT)  
[1](#)B. CHIANG MAI 46 (RAIDS AGAINST THE KNU)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.  
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Though the precise timing of events is still unclear, the Thai Government returned some 70 Burmese asylum seekers from two refugee camps to Burma sometime between the evening of July 16 and the morning of July 17. Thai authorities escorted the group to the Eh Tu Ta camp for internally displaced persons on the Burmese side of the Salween River, the residents of which benefit from protection by the Karen National Union. According to the Royal Thai Government (RTG), the group in question entered Thailand after May 10, 2008, but was not forced to do so due to fighting between the Burma Army and the Karen National Union (KNU). The unusual step of returning migrants after they have successfully entered a refugee camp, when viewed in conjunction with steps taken by the RTG to assuage the Burmese junta's concerns about anti-regime activity taking place on Thai soil over the last few months, is yet another sign of an increased willingness on the part of the RTG to accommodate the Burmese junta's interests. End Summary.

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Deported, but not Handed Over  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) According to Thai National Intelligence Agency and district officials in Mae Hong Son Province, the RTG returned some 70 migrants to Burma on July 16 from the Mae La Luang and Mae La Oon camps. (Note: A UNHCR officer in the province told us on July 17 that 20 were taken across the border on July 16, and that others might be taken across on July 17.) According to provincial officials, the group was escorted by boat across the Salween River to the Eh Tu Ta camp for internally displaced persons, a fact confirmed by Karen National Union (KNU) contacts. This camp is on the Burma side of the border, but is inside territory controlled by the KNU, which has been waging low-level military conflict against the Burmese regime for some 50 years. According to the RTG, some returnees even voluntarily went back to their home villages.

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What Was Their Status?  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) The RTG and the KNU agree that this group of asylum seekers entered Thailand sometime after May 10. It is also clear that this group was not formally screened by the Provincial Admission Boards (PAB) -- the RTG body charged with

determining whether or not to allow individuals to remain protected in refugee camps and possibly enter the refugee processing pipeline for resettlement to a third country. Royal Thai army officials told UNHCR that PAB screening was not necessary due to their assessment the group "had not fled fighting". However, the KNU maintains that there were skirmishes inside Karen State between the Burma Army and the KNU in May and June, and that the Burma Army torched some villages during these clashes. KNU contacts told us that they could not yet definitively say whether the group in question was directly affected by these skirmishes. The same contacts told us that the group that was forcibly returned consisted mainly of high school-age students.

14. (C) For its part, the RTG's assessment is that the group consisted of economic migrants and others hoping for third country resettlement. According to Mae Hong Son provincial authorities, February announcements by USG officials of the impending start of the US refugee resettlement program in camps in the province created a "pull factor," encouraging would-be migrants to cross the border into Thailand. (Note: the US program has a publicly announced cut-off date designed to forestall such movements.) Although UNHCR successfully intervened with the RTG's National Security Council in May to stop a deportation of 480 asylum seekers from two camps in Mae Hong Son, the NSC was unwilling to stop this deportation. Provincial officials also told us that any migrants entering Thailand after May 10 would be returned to Burma if intercepted before reaching one of the official refugee camps. They told us they have also warned the KNU not to facilitate crossing into Thailand by migrants who are not fleeing fighting between the KNU and the Burma Army.

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Comment  
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15. (C) While "soft" deportations like this one occur frequently, it is unusual for Thai authorities to forcibly return anyone who

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has succeeded in reaching an official refugee camp. Though the decision to return this group was likely made at a provincial level, and one of Mae Hong Son's vice governors is known not to sympathize with the plight of refugees, it is significant that the National Security Council did not intervene to stop this action as it did just two months ago in a similar case. This episode, when viewed in conjunction with the detention by the Thai military of an AmCit in April (Ref A), and actions taken by Thai authorities in March against the KNU (Ref B), is a sign that the RTG is more willing to actively address the Burmese Government's concerns about the activities of Burmese groups on Thai soil than was the previous military-appointed government. We will continue to follow-up with UNHCR, provincial, and central government officials to emphasize that all Burmese residing in a refugee camp deserve the opportunity to be pre-screened by UNHCR and take their case to a Provincial Admission Board before any action is taken to return them to Burma, and that asylum status decisions should not be made by the army. We expect to receive an update on the situation from UNHCR officials either late today or sometime on July 18.

16. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Bangkok and Rangoon.  
ANDERSON